

Ministry

Christian ministry is activity motivated by Christian faith. The term ministry comes from the idea expressed by the Greek word **diakonos** meaning **one who serves**. All who serve in the name of Christ share the Christian ministry.

History and Background

The Gospels show Jesus as one who is sent in ministry by God. In Mark 9:37 (TEV) it says, "Whoever welcomes me, welcomes not only me but also the one who sent me." In turn, Jesus sent others to ministry as we see in Luke 10:1 (TEV): "After this the Lord chose another seventy ... and sent them out two by two"

The Gospels also show Jesus as one who serves. When the disciples were wondering about greatness in ministry, Jesus commented, "I am among you as one who serves" (Luke 22:27). He recommends that the disciples become servants, too: "Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant" (Matthew 20:26). These and other passages underscore the servant quality of ministry.

While the New Testament gives this clear understanding that we are each called, as Jesus was called, to ministry and servanthood, it also lays the groundwork for a misinterpretation of ministry as occupation.

Jesus chose the 12 (Matthew 10:5) and the 70 (Luke 10:1) and sent them to serve. Acts 1-6 shows how the 12 ministered through missionary

outreach and filled the liturgical, teaching and disciplinary needs of the early church's life together. When they couldn't do everything that needed doing, they ordained the seven, who became known as deacons. Acts 14 tells that Paul and Barnabas appointed elders. There is evidence of an order of ministry by A.D. 120: bishops, elders (or presbyters) and deacons.

So from the very outset, the church valued people whose lives were occupied in ministry. More and more, people who provided leadership to the church and its people did so as occupation. By the Middle Ages, ministry was tightly identified with the clergy. The laity, the people who did not have an occupation of ministry, were structured out of ministry.

The Reformation helped change that. Martin Luther's teaching on the vocation of all believers made it clear that people didn't have to be members of a holy order in order to be in ministry. Luther's understanding of **vocation** was similar to the New Testament idea of vocation (**klesis**). Paul's vocation was apostle; Paul's occupation was tentmaker. Martin Luther reminded all the people of God (the "laos") of their vocation, or call to faithfulness, regardless of their occupations. He spoke of "the ministry (or priesthood) of all believers."

Common Practices

"Who ministers at your church?" If you answered this question without

thinking, what would your response be? Would you name the pastor? If so, you'd be like many other people. Since the days of the reformation, the idea of the ministry of the laity has not received consistent attention. This understanding of ministry says that people who minister continue the ministry of Jesus Christ and are sent into the world to serve God.

Each of us--every man, woman and child who bears the mark of baptism--shares in this ministry. Each is sent to serve on behalf of God.

Unfortunately, in the centuries since Martin Luther's revolutionary concept was shared, the church has struggled with what have been called the "twinned evils" of clericalism and anti-clericalism. The first inappropriately exalts the status of the ordained; the second is a reaction to that disproportion which results in a degradation of the meaning and importance of ordained ministry.

The antidote to these distortions lies in the understanding and ownership by all Christians of their vocation as ministers of the church. As members of the Body of Christ we are each called to this vocation, sometimes called "baptismal ministry". We are sent into the world to continue Jesus' ministry that brings good news to the poor, proclaims liberty to the captive, recovery of sight to the blind, sets free the oppressed and announces that God saves God's people (Luke 4:18-19). The life of the church helps us discern our vocation and helps equip us for it.

Claiming the ministry of all believers does not deny that there are

those for whom "occupational" ministry is part of their response to their unique vocation. There is a difference in how people are called to ministry. In a sense, all people are sent by God in Christ to ministry. In ministries that require ordination, licensing or commissioning, the sense of being sent is reinforced by the part of the Body of Christ known as denominations. In the United Church of Christ, it is the association (or in some cases the conference for the association) which acts in behalf of the denomination to ordain, commission and license people to particular kinds of ministry. Ordained ministry sets apart people who are called to, and prepared for, providing pastoral oversight in preaching and liturgical observances, teaching, counseling and congregational life. Licensed ministry and commissioned ministry are occupational lay ministries that are recognized and authorized by the association. Part of what people who minister as occupation do is help others see their own vocation of ministry and develop their own gifts for ministry.

The local church reinforces and enlivens the sense of God's people being sent to ministry as vocation. This can happen through worship and study. Some churches have special rituals to elect, appoint and send people to ministry within the congregation. They dedicate officers or have a special service at the beginning of the school year, recognizing ministry in the church school. Most churches do relatively

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little to underscore the need to send people to ministry in the world of daily tasks and situations. The more people feel sent, the greater the likelihood that people will recognize that they are in ministry. While churches sometimes talk of “equipping people for ministry,” few talk of sending people out for ministry where they are daily.

Developing Skills for Ministry

God has not only called us to ministry, God has endowed us with resources to carry out ministry. God's graciousness and initiative are seen in the gifts given to us--talents, abilities, skills, knowledge, temperament and attitudes--that enable us to respond with faithfulness in ministry. We have to accept these gifts, figure out what they are and how we can use them in ministry. Sometimes it's easy to recognize the gifts--they are just there. Everybody knows Ellen can sing and she loves to. People who have been to a church supper know Jeff makes great bread, and they are delighted to call out Jeff's gifts. It's easy. They may say, "Well, Jeff, I'm really looking forward to the supper on Thursday. I can't wait for some of your bread."

Sometimes it isn't so easy to understand what gifts are or to observe them. For example, not many people know that Ramona visits the local jail weekly and Jamie is an advocate at school board meetings. The church

needs to challenge the potential in its members and find ways to inspire and support them in ways that will help their gifts blossom.

Some gifts can be developed through study, training, experience and discipline. That's why churches plan training sessions for new church school teachers or let someone who has never taught help in a class with an experienced teacher. There are many ways churches call forth the gifts of their members, but the training often takes place outside the church, just where the ministry takes place. So it is that Kristi develops skills in running a meeting at the PTA and applies them as district coordinator of Bread for the World.

Some people's gifts are their quiet presence, their ability to sense what the “right word” may be. Often people don't think of their personal traits as “gifts”: they'll say, “Oh, I guess that's just how I am” or, “people say that about me, but really I don't do anything special.” The use of the term “gifted” in educational settings is misleading in the church. Some people may mistake the idea of gift with unusual talents which call for training and practice. It is not a special few, but all who are God's people who are abundantly and uniquely gifted, with all that we have and are.

Responsibilities

Every moment of our lives provides opportunities for ministry. All the many facets of our lives--our work, family life, leisure, public service--

need to be seen in relation to ministry. We are responsible for sustaining and supporting one another in these ministries, and we are responsible for naming and affirming the importance of these ministries, along with the ministries we do in the life of the church. Of course these, too, should be experienced and affirmed as ministry. We should enable one another to appreciate the varieties of ministries being done in our midst. We are called, nurtured and sometimes remarkably transformed as we join our gifts with others in the Body of Christ to bear Christ's own ministry in vocation and occupation.

Issues Facing the Church

- We often look for gifts of occupation, and call them out, but we don't so often do it for gifts of vocation. How can we do both?
- Nothing says that ministry as vocation is less than ministry as occupation, but often people feel that way. What understandings help you see all kinds of ministry as equal in God's sight? What gets in the way?
- It can take significant education, discernment and reinforcement for members to recognize their callings. How can your congregation cultivate, recognize and affirm the “ministries of daily life” of all its members?

Questions

- What is ministry?
- What are some of the characteristics of ministry?
- Who sends people to serve in ministry?
- What is the difference between ministry of vocation and of occupation?
- How does or could your church underscore the sense of ministry as vocation?
- If you were to write a paper on ministry, how would it differ from what is written here?